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Secularism and Religion: Strange Bedfellows?

John McDade

A paper given at the Conference on 'Religion, Identity and Conflict' at St Mary's University (December 2016)

*'A good deal of American history can be told as the story of how we have gotten from the idea that the establishment of religion is the true meaning of civilization to the idea that civilization is threatened by religious establishments.'*¹

Andrew Delbanco's words point to the shift that has happened in our lifetime, and not only in America. I'm not sure we understand what has happened and why it has happened. From the widespread assumption that religion expresses the best in us – arising from our aspirations towards goodness, love and truth and confirming them as the deep grammar of individual and social identity – we have moved towards an nagging suspicion that religion so much is the enemy of the good that our culture would be better without it. Religious people – generally people who are sensitive to the views of others, especially those who declare themselves against religion and all its works – find this disorienting. Culture wars are nasty affairs, and no sensible person wants to be a combatant in a conflict that no one can win.

I remember a conversation with Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor in which Rowan Williams' name came up, and I said, 'You know when Rowan was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, the newspapers said he had a brain the size of Basingstoke.' Cormac said, 'And Basingstoke is a very difficult place to find your way round.' I thought of this recently while reading the work of the critical theorist Frederic Jameson: he uses the term 'cognitive mapping' as a metaphor for how we situate ourselves in our culture. A cognitive map, as he uses the term, is how an individual represents to himself or herself their lived world. Without it, we don't know where we are, what the coordinates of our world are and importantly we don't seem to make sense of the world we're in. Cardinal Cormac, by his own admission, had no cognitive map of either Basingstoke or what Rowan Williams was talking about: both of them defeated him at some level or other. Frederic Jameson characterises our cultural predicament as one in which we don't have a cognitive map of the coordinates and intersections and complexities of the *Lebenswelt*, the lived world of our shared experience. That seems to me right.

When my father worked in a factory in Glasgow from the 1930s to the 1960s, his lived world and the world of his employment could be understood by him without too much difficulty. The world could be grasped, even by a working man without much formal education, because life was lived according to accepted codes and inherited values that hadn't changed much across the decades, even across the centuries. But such has been the rapid development of a globalized, secularized world of late capitalism, that it is not easily represented, interpreted and grasped, even by a well educated person teaching in a university. Do we have such a cognitive map today, or is our experience rather that we lack such a cultural Baedeker? And how exactly does religious faith find a place in our lived world, both individually and collectively, when the dynamic of history moves away from religious faith and the codes of identity which it bequeaths?

¹ A. Delbanco, *The New Republic* (May 7, 1990), 40.

Terry Eagleton thinks that a modern cognitive map would highlight two 'trig points' on the landscape, imaginatively the high ground on two promontories, those of secularism and religion that represent incompatible options within our culture. Their bitter struggle, he says, will continue for a long time to come. A plague on both their houses, a sensible person might say: why should we be asked to live in a world characterised by this antithesis? Why should this be the core of a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West, that now replaces the ideological conflicts of communism and capitalism on the world stage?

In the Catholic tradition, reason and religious faith belong together and they do so in all mature religions that are not afraid to allow their ancient claims and traditions to be scrutinised and modified by rational inquiry. But ours is not a world where a mutual integration of faith and reason can be achieved. More thinking is needed, particularly about 'the secular' and 'the religious' within modernity so that we might devise the cognitive map that we need.² They are twins with some shared characteristics. Secularity, I suspect, is more of a faith than is often realised. It is certainly not a neutral project, but strangely a re-enactment of some of the features of the religion against which it turns.

Without realising it, most people have internalised a modern myth that treats reason and religion as binary opposites. The myth in question – of course it is never acknowledged as a myth – is usually labelled the 'narrative of secularisation' according to which, as the range and depth of secularisation increases, religious faith becomes attenuated, eventually disappearing. The expansion of reason brings the death of religious faith. The narrative of secularisation sees our modern history as a long, ineluctable slide towards a God-free world of human flourishing. This is our modern myth of the progress of history seen from a small island in the ocean of capitalism.

But is it clear that reason and religion should be viewed as standing in a relationship of inverse proportion, according to which the expansion of one leads to the diminution of the other? After all, as we know all too well, a religion untouched by reason becomes deviant and socially damaging and it is equally true that a culture of rationality that is hostile to religious belief is no less deviant and no less damaging to human flourishing. What should be a tango danced by two can be spoiled if the legs of one partner trip up the legs of the other, as Ed Balls might confirm: both secularism and religion have their own way of causing us to crash out of *Strictly*. And so the sensible thing is to refuse to play the game of treating them as incompatible opposites. But let us recognise that there are many secularists who could not countenance such a connection, and, no less vigorously, there are many religious people distrustful of the mutations of identity that secularism seems to bring. All the sociological evidence is that Pentecostalism is the form of Christian identity that is growing most strongly. Why should this be so? In part because it seems to offer a form of individual and collective identity able to resist the encroachments of critical inquiry into matters of faith, an emotional style of fideism, if you like to use those terms.

I've already highlighted the modern myth of the narrative of secularisation. Let me consider another mythical aspect of secular modernity, its claim to break from the past. Benavides says that 'modernity presupposes an act of self-conscious distancing from a past or situation regarded as naive'.³ In the same vein, Robert Yelle writes that

² Cf. José Casanova, 'The Secular and Secularisms,' *Social Research* 76/4 (2009), 1049-56

³ Benavides, 'Modernity,' in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 186-204; 187).

“The idea of modernity rests on rupture. It brings into view a monumental narrative – the breaching of magical covenants, the surpassing of medieval superstitions, the undoing of hierarchical traditions. The advent of modernity insinuates the disenchantment of the world...” Modernity asserts its exceptional status as a transcendence of a past regarded as superstitious or primitive.... Secular modernity, like Christianity before it, has defined itself as a miraculous “Event,” an occasion of Enlightenment that breaks with tradition. ⁴

Yelle’s point is that modernity re-enacts the rupture that Christianity claimed for itself in breaking free from a pagan religious past and an ossified Judaism. In the Christian vision, time starts again with Christ, but now the modern moment of the Enlightenment is the *kairos*. This time, the ‘tradition’ that is superseded by modernity is the very tradition of religious faith itself: the earlier death of God on Calvary is replaced by the death of God in European culture. Salvation comes to the European house through this new divine death: the irruption of ‘Enlightenment’, evoking the ‘Resurrection’, dispels the shadows of superstition. Herbert McCabe was right to suggest that much of modern atheism is implicitly based on the idea that we are the slaves of a masterful God whose overthrow and downfall is needed if human beings are to be free. In mythical modernity, we are declared to be free at last.

Now the myth of modernity which Yelle identifies casts light on the intolerance with which secularism reacts to any resurgence of the old religious past represented by ‘miracles and magic’. It posits a dichotomy between the sacred and secular and declares that the sacred has no place in the new world order that has become ‘disenchanted’, ‘un-magicked’. Once you have removed religion from the foundations of modern European culture, and excluded it from the processes of socialization needed to maintain cohesion in society – religion after all is judged by most Europeans to be a source of social conflict and intolerance – then it is hard to see how the Christian Church can feature on this modern European map, except by being considered the historical source of Europe’s cultural patrimony. Christian culture becomes a branch of contemporary tourism.

I’ve always suspected that much of the difficulty which atheistic secularity has with God is twofold: first of all, it is really a difficulty with ‘religion’ rather than ‘God’, or rather with the way in which ‘God’ functions within certain styles of ‘religion’ which seem delusionary and infantile.⁵ The second difficulty, I think, is that people don’t want to feel about themselves the way they think Christianity makes them feel, namely, infantile and guilty. (It is hard enough being a four year old when you’re four years old, but you shouldn’t be made to feel like a four year old when you’re older. Preachers, please note.)

Religion is the most contested category in a range of disciplines, including theology. William Cavanaugh makes the point that generally in our Anglophone cultures, religion is indicted for various things, such as fostering violence, intolerance, bigotry, child abuse, delusions, psychological immaturity, regressive and rigid morality and so on. And for this indictment to work, religion must be contrasted with something else that is less inclined to these things, such as ‘a secular outlook’ that is commended as

⁴ R. Yelle, ‘The Trouble with Transcendence: Carl Schmitt’s “Exception” as a Challenge,’ *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22/2 (2010), 189-206; 190-1. The first quotation is from Saurabh Dube.

⁵ A fascinating discussion of how religion and the secular were construed in the early Christian centuries is given in A. McGowan, ‘The Ancient Limits of Modern Religion: Perpetua, Augustine and the Construction of the Secular,’ *Pacifica* 23 (2010), 267-80

better and more humane. 'In order for the indictment of religion to hold,' he says, 'religion must be contrasted with something else that is inherently *less* prone to violence: the secular'.⁶ So in our modern context the world 'religion' is a highly malleable term, generally freighted with negative meanings when compared with its rival, the secular.

Religion is generally assumed by its critics to be 'absolutist, assertive, divisive and irrational', while secularity operates with opposite values: democratic, modest, tolerant reasonableness. Cavanaugh's particular concern is with what he calls 'the myth of religious violence' – again that word 'myth' is interesting because it challenges the assumption that the world of secularity is governed entirely by critical reason. , the way in which it is generally held that religion is more prone to violence than other cultural products.

The whole argument [about religious violence] depends on the religious/secular distinction, but no one provides a coherent argument for supposing that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God.... American Christians, for example, are far more willing to kill for their country than for Jesus.⁷

He takes the line that the real religion of America is nationalism, but in these Trumped-up days, we will pass over that point and note his case that the religious and the secular are a dyad, a pair that belong together like love and marriage, like horse and carriage, Laurel and Hardy, Morecambe and Wise, Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood. So why is the pairing 'secular' and 'religious' invented? Cavanaugh writes that

Modern Westerners have created the religious/secular distinction as an accompaniment to certain shifts in power between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, among other shifts.

And this distinction, Cavanaugh says, arises at a particular time, the early modern period of the 17th century, where, exhausted by religious wars, there was a deliberate shift away from the consubstantiality of religious authority and political power within a single confessional state, towards a form of nation state in which religion would have no power. The way was open for the all-powerful nation state that no longer had to contend with the forensic demands of religion. The state progressively declared itself to be religion-free, and although Europe continued its wars, at least they were no longer wars fought on religious grounds. This is a familiar argument that bears repeating because it makes the important point that *the modern invention of religion coincides with the modern invention of the secular*. They are the fractious brothers who are conceived deliberately to be rivals of one another: religion is Esau redivivus, secularism Jacob, and it is Jacob, the secularist brother, who seizes the birthright of shaping the future.

The argument unfolds into the view that 'there was no religion until modern Westerners invented it', a deliberately provocative aphorism.⁸ What is modern

⁶ W. T. Cavanaugh, 'Religious Violence as Modern Myth,' *Political Theology* 15/6 (2014), 486-502; 487

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale, 2012), reviewed by W. T. Cavanaugh in *First Things* (May 2013)

about the ideas of 'religions' and 'being religious' is the naming of some things as 'religious' and others as 'not religious'. This cordons off religion into a small and inherently private aspect of life, while the rest of life, the secular, is nonreligious, unrelated to the worship of God at all. The public forum is to be a Godfree zone, but God still has a place within the private spiritual mythology within the head of individuals. If we speak in this way, this leaves us as believers trying to bridge a gap between our 'religion' and the rest of our life that is deemed to lack any connection to God. Surely we all in some measure recognise this gap and how difficult it is. But should we accept this antithetical opposition between the secular' and 'the religious'?

We still have to think about the wonderful description of true religion given in the Epistle of James in the New Testament: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world' (James 1.27). True religion takes you out of yourself in acts of compassion and justice. Religion for James flows directly into social action, but for anyone who has internalised the secular/religious distinction, religion is consigned to the head and stays there. Hence the invention of various forms of 'spirituality', derivative religious values adapted to provide a form of transcendence, that replace religious observances.

So, 'the marginalization of religion in modernity is not simply the way things naturally and inevitably must be, but the result of a recent and contingent set of arrangements', says Cavanaugh, and he is right. Reflect on this: our cognitive map seems to feature an invented opposition between the secular and religious which begins at a particular time, in which we seem to have invented 'religion' as a set of things we believe in, a list of propositions to which we give intellectual assent in a distinct area of life and identity. And of course if that is our model of religion, then we judge other religions by the degree to which they correspond to our model of what a religion looks like.

By contrast with our Westernized way of thinking about religion as something over against the secular and as a set of propositions to be believed in, Islam might come across as an abnormally politicized religion because our assumption is that religion should not be politicized at all because politics is the prerogative of the state that has declared itself to be either free from religion, or even hostile to religion, as in the case of French *laïcité*. No wonder France has problems with Islamism. It is hard to think of a more brutal clash than that between *laïcité*, a deep hostility to religion in the public forum, and the political aspirations of Islamic theocracy that turns its face against Western liberalism.

Finally, some closing remarks about the entanglement of secularism and religion on a cognitive map. I keep meaning to write a two part article about 'How Rousseau invented modern religion' and 'How Rousseau invented the modern world.' I think this way because we are all Rousseau's children. Only a modern person, I tell my students, would think that religion is personal. And that is because the zone of the personal and the private is where a secularising world, following Rousseau, has decided that religion should be dumped.

Rousseau teaches Europe that the Church should no longer be a social force in European life but we should not worry because religion can be maintained by being transformed into an dimension of the inner self.⁹ Rousseau picks up that dimension of Christian experience that looks to the action of God within the self and makes it the core of a natural, universally accessible contact with the divine, thereby inventing

⁹ J. Karant, 'Revisiting Rousseau's Civil Religion,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42/10 (2016), 1028-58

a religion or spirituality that bypasses Sinai, Calvary, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the Church itself, all of which are rendered redundant at a stroke. By alchemy, the particular genius of Jewish and Christian monotheistic faith mutates into a set of religiously infused sentiments which must be handled reverentially because they are the work of God within the self. The other side of this shift into interiority is that it is a subtle way of de-Christianising Europe by removing the Christian voice from public life.

But this is balanced by another move, this time strangely reinstating religion within the public forum: because, as Rousseau says, 'no State has ever been founded without religion serving at its base,' there must be what he calls a 'civil religion' that unifies people in their collective moral and social endeavor. Would Rousseau have agreed, I wonder, with Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is"? I think he would, and Rousseau is not flattered by the comparison.

So, having transferred modified religion by making it into a core dimension of the isolated self – the true self, for Rousseau, is always a self removed from the deformations of society – he realizes that the social order outlined in *The Social Contract* requires a religious, transcendent grounding if it is to function properly. In Mark Cladis' words:

'Rousseau was one of the first to recognize what may seem like a contradiction or paradox; a democratic nation that supports individual rights requires some form of public religion, that is, some shared beliefs and practices that generate moral community.' ¹⁰

Hence, Rousseau's conclusion:

There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is up to the Sovereign to fix, not precisely as dogmas of Religion but as sentiments of sociability (*sentiments de sociabilité*) without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a loyal subject.' ¹¹ (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*)

Notice that 'dogmas', traditionally characteristic of revealed religions, give way to the '*sentiments de sociabilité*' that inspire moral and social unity in a society that no longer locates authority in the will of a transcendent deity ('the divine right of kings'), but assigns it to 'the general will' of the people. But 'dogmas' still have their place in this civil religion, although much reduced in number:

The dogmas of the civil Religion ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanations or commentary. The existence of the powerful, intelligent, beneficent, prescient and provident Deity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social Contract and the laws; these are the positive dogmas. As for the negative dogmas, I restrict them to a single one; namely intolerance: it is a feature of the cult we have rejected...

¹⁰ (M. S. Cladis, *Public Vision, Private Lives: Rousseau, Religion and 21st Century Democracy* (OUP, 2003), 189).

¹¹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, IV, 8, #32, ed. V. Gourevitch (CUP, 1997), 150

Now that there no longer is and no longer can be an exclusive national Religion, one must tolerate all those which tolerate the others insofar as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of the Citizen. But whoever dares to say, *no salvation outside the Church*, has to be driven out of the State... ¹²

Rousseau was offering a civil religion that could be accepted by all citizens without much reflection and that guided how people *lived* rather than taught them what to believe. How strange it is that the elements of this civil religion are so redolent of fundamental themes in Christian theology, but of course Rousseau is offering us a distillation of teachings *from* Christianity that is meant to be more effective *than* Christianity in creating a good society. It is a form of religion that fosters civic virtue, and how interesting it is that the religion that will not be tolerated by this civil religion is Christianity itself, on the grounds that Christianity is offensive to tolerance and rights. In his 18 August 1756 *Letter to Voltaire*, Rousseau argued that religious reform was needed because 'there can exist religions which attack the foundation of society, and ... it is necessary to begin by exterminating these religions in order to assure the peace of the state'. ¹³ Rousseau's civil religion reeks of an authoritarianism not far from the type of intolerant Christianity he was rebuking and pointing towards the totalitarian social orders of the twentieth century.

Clearly there is a version of civil religion in the public life of the United States which Robert Bellah has examined fruitfully, but Europe too has had a version of this, albeit in a more diverse and changing form than is found in America. ¹⁴ The civil religion of Europe has moved considerably from its original template of unified, cohesive Catholic Church working hand in glove with an Emperor to bring about God's purposes for humanity. It was subsequently modified in the wake of the Reformation to accommodate the emergence of nation states fostering different state churches. In Ventura's words, 'The state was a confessional state, a state "confessing" a specific religious orthodoxy; the church was an established church. Civil religion was made of both dimensions.' ¹⁵ The narrative unfolds from a recognition of confessional pluralism within Christianity to an acceptance of pluralism within 'religion', and finally to the affirmation of human rights and freedoms, irrespective of religious affiliation, within the liberal social order of the European Union.

Europe's present civil religion has become explicitly post-religious in all its features, and in the process, it sends a message to all the populations of Europe that religious identity has ceased to be constitutive of the self and of the nations which compose modern Europe. It is a message which is well received because it gives people a normative modern identity detached from the codes, symbols and myths of the Christian religion. Even the residual religions that Rousseau saw as needed for the proper flourishing of a democratic republic – an *inner* personal interiority in which we commune with the God within, and an *outer* civil religion of shared social and moral values – eventually in the late twentieth century come to discard any reference to the divine. It is the ultimate civil religion, one might say, because whereas Rousseau wrote in a world that still thought that the word 'God' could still be used – at least as a point of reference within a deistic, natural religion that would eventually,

¹² Rousseau, *op.cit.*, 32, 35

¹³ Quoted in Karant, 1046

¹⁴ R. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America,' *Daedalus* 134 (2005), 40-55 (first published in 1967); R. Bellah, 'Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic,' *Society* 35/2 (1998), 193-201

¹⁵ M. Ventura, 'The Changing Civil Religion of Secular Europe,' *George Washington International Law Review* 41/4 (2010), 947-61; 952-3.

he thought, replace revealed religion – we are now uncomfortable with even a minimal reference to the divine. ‘We don’t do God’, as Alastair Campbell put it.

What we are seeing now is the logical outcome of what Rousseau started: when the divine is regarded as an indeterminate aspect of the self and when public religion does no more than confirm social attitudes that foster good citizenship, the conditions for a secularized, post-religious Europe have been created. But while Rousseau retained the idea of God so that an avowedly 18th Century secular state could nevertheless have a form of transcendence and moral accountability, in modern Europe this has mutated into a prescriptive form of civil religion founded on rights, freedoms and humanitarian sentiments. Transgressions of this civil religion are punishable by expulsion from the community of right-thinking people. The Church of Twitter and its sister communion in Facebook has ways of shaming heretics who breach the codes of civil religion, and holding them up to public abuse.¹⁶ Recognition of the rights of all becomes an absolutist principle, and the incitement to intolerance the great civil sin.

Just as Rousseau introduced a mutation into the character of religion in order to accommodate a secular social order, thereby making Christianity and other revealed religions redundant, so our ‘social sentiments’ of rights, tolerance and freedom form a quasi-religious foundation that our secularly governed society needs in order to maintain its unity. And within this social order, traditional revealed religions are under caution about what they can say and not say. To what extent we Christians have conspired in our own invisibility in the West, to the point where, I fear, we become invisible, invisible even to ourselves, is something that should be noted.

Is it any wonder that religious people often feel they have no way of cognitively mapping the world in which they now live? In a very striking sense, they don’t know *where* they are. How do you present a refreshed account of the Gospel when the civil religion already in place can make no room for it and does not see it as integral to what society needs? What exactly can Christianity offer a culture that, while being as Nietzsche saw still dependent on Christian impulses, has declared itself in possession of all the axioms and principles needed to unify a society? With such a civil religion – this set of elements forming the basis of social life – secularism might be showing itself to be more of a social faith than is generally assumed. What we see around us is *a form of secularism that is Rousseau’s civil religion adapted for this late capitalist world*. In which case, it is hardly surprising that one can think of secularism and religion as ‘strange bedfellows’.

¹⁶ Jon Ronson’s TED lecture on ‘Public Shaming’, available on YouTube, is essential viewing.